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After months of often acrimonious talks over a proposal to clean up Waukegan Harbor, the city has rejected the idea of dumping dredged material into a local landfill, easing one concern city leaders had about the project.

But negotiations are far from over. Waukegan officials said Thursday they are still worried about how much the \$21 million cleanup will cost their city and whether it will open the harbor to more industrial shipping as the city tries to redevelop its waterfront for recreation.

"We have a limited amount of resources. What is the most important priority?" said Jeff Jeep, Waukegan's environmental attorney. "There are a lot of things going on. There is a need to look at the bigger picture."

As the city and other parties responsible for the Yeoman Creek landfill signed a contract Thursday to close it, local and federal agencies began searching for a different place to dump the PCB-contaminated material they hope to dredge from the harbor.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), who has been pushing for the cleanup, said Thursday that while cleaning up the harbor should be a top priority, an agreement does not have to be reached this year.

Kirk said his office would do everything it could to minimize the city's financial burden, including arranging low-interest loans from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. But he said it would be a mistake for Waukegan to decide not to pursue the cleanup project.

"Waukegan does not have an economic future unless the harbor is cleaned up. We don't have a choice," Kirk said. "They will go from hero to zero if the harbor is not cleaned up."

Pollution has long been a problem in the harbor. In the 1970s, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency discovered polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, in Waukegan Harbor at dangerously high levels. PCBs are known to cause tumors, reproductive failure and liver

disorders.

In the 1990s, the agency launched a cleanup and spent more than \$20 million to remove tons of PCB-soaked material from the harbor. In 1993, Waukegan Harbor was declared mostly clean, but PCB contamination remained at the harbor bottom.

Since then, local and federal officials generally have agreed that another cleanup is needed but have been unable to agree on the details.

Waukegan is in line for more than \$15 million in federal grants to clean up the harbor. But the city would be responsible for the remaining \$6 million--and that has been a sticking point in the negotiations, officials said.

The proposed cleanup project would team the EPA with the Army Corps, which has wanted to dredge the harbor for shipping.

For months, federal officials have said that the Yeoman Creek landfill--a Superfund cleanup site--would be the most cost-effective place to put the dredged material. The parties responsible for the landfill have kept it open for possible use. The cost of doing so has been "close to \$1 million," said Harvey Sheldon, who represents Waukegan School District 60, a party responsible for the landfill.

In a letter dated Feb. 5, the Illinois EPA said the landfill would need to obtain an expansion permit before it could accept polluted sludge from the harbor.

Obtaining the permit is a lengthy and sometimes expensive process that can take three to five years, said Joyce Munie, permit section manager in the Illinois EPA's Bureau of Land.

So last week, city officials said they no longer would consider using the landfill, a proposal that long had irked residents of the nearby 5th Ward.

The parties responsible for the landfill signed a contract Thursday with Indianapolis-based Heritage Environmental Services to seal the site and eventually cover it with dirt and grass.

Now the city, the corps, the EPA and other parties to the negotiations are looking at other landfills permitted to take the polluted material, including Onyx Zion Landfill in Zion.

With Yeoman Creek no longer an issue, negotiations continue over other points, mainly how deep the corps will dredge the harbor during the cleanup and how much the city will pay.

Some aldermen say they suspect that the cleanup project is just a way to get the city to swallow a deep dredging project.

"What is evident is that this is a dredging project and not a cleanup project," said Ald. Rick Larsen (8th). "We could do some cleanup of the harbor--if that is what their true intent is--without deep dredging."